Examples of Processes for Selecting Content

The following narrative is a record of one person's approach to selecting staff development content for an identified need. Although other processes may legitimately be taken when selecting staff development content, certain principles apply to all such searches:

Selection is a Critical Decision
- The selection of appropriate content for a district or school staff development program is one of the most critical decisions to be made. If the content does not have a solid research base, the district/school risks considerable expenditure of time, resources, and effort on learning, implementing and evaluating something that does not yield the desired effects.

Match Student Achievement Goals to Content
- Finding a good match between district/school goals for student achievement and content likely to achieve those goals is not a simple process. The profit motive often drives the claims made by commercial interests for their products, and personal ideologies can affect both the research undertaken and the results obtained by researchers as they pursue evidence for their beliefs. Unfortunately, there is not a simple index one can consult that states, "If your ninth-grade students are struggling with Algebra I, the three most powerful remedies are 'x', 'y', and 'z'."

Invest Time in Searching for Appropriate Content
- Investing time in the search for appropriate staff development content is time well spent. Spending the time and resources to investigate the research-based options that address your students' needs for improvement greatly increases the likelihood that a district/school staff development process will be successful.
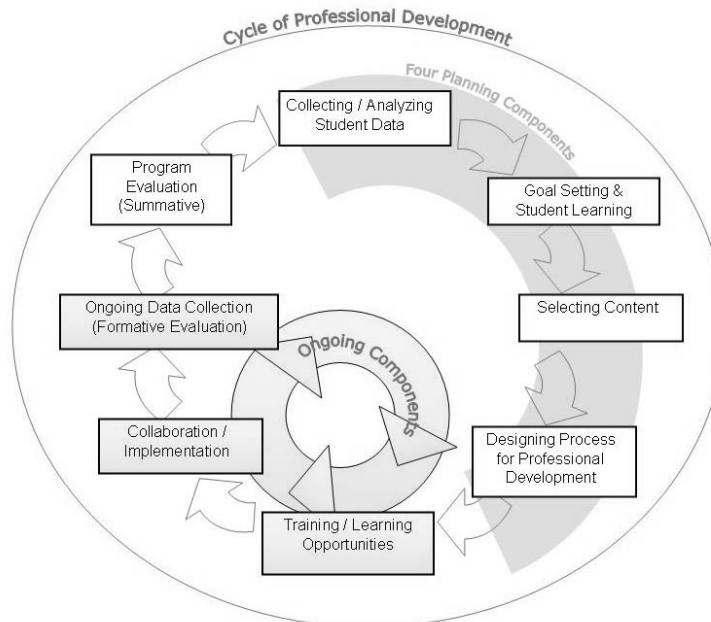
As you read on the following pages about two school districts – Mid-Continent School District and Winfield-Mount Union – make notes about specific details that demonstrate "best practice" in these Iowa PD Model components:
Collecting and Analyzing Data
Goal Setting and Student Learning
Identifying Research Based Content
Training and Implementation

Examples of Processes for Selecting Content, presented by Dr. Beverly Showers: Iowa Professional Development Technical Assistance Seminar Series Training Materials, October 2003

Example 1: Mid-Continent School District

What is the District/School Goal for Improvement Student Learning?

After analyzing its student achievement data, the Mid-Continent School District discovered a distressing pattern in its reading scores: total reading scores were declining through the grades. Thus, while 81% of elementary students were deemed proficient (using the state's criterion for proficiency), 65% of middle school students and 61% of high school students were scoring at the proficient rate. Closer examination of the data revealed that many of their students were struggling with higher-order comprehension tasks, or what NAEP defines as "the ability to interrelate ideas and make generalizations" (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000). When special education, low socioeconomic status and English language learner subgroups were examined, the trend of declining scores was even more pronounced.

The Mid-Continent School District set Annual Yearly Progress goals for reading, using the state's trajectories (as negotiated with the federal government under No Child Left Behind guidelines). Its middle and high schools, however, set goals to rapidly increase the numbers of students able to engage successfully in higher-order comprehension tasks.

Is There Scientifically-Based Research on Teaching Higher-Order Comprehension Skills to Secondary Students?

What is available to address this need? Entering the research base in any specific area can be a bit overwhelming at first. Mid-Continent needed a plan that would enable it to identify choices in curriculum and instruction that addressed its need and had strong evidence supporting its efficacy in the area they wanted to improve.

Look at the Work of Others Who Share Your Agenda

One way to enter the research base without being swamped by the sheer volume of published material is to begin with the work of others who have already begun the work of reviewing research in a given area. Mid-Continent started with three sources:

> Although this example was generated by a single individual working alone, it is strongly suggested that a committee (three to six members) work together to study the research base and generate options for consideration by the staff. Thus, one or two people can search data bases, one can locate and copy relevant articles, and one or two can read and summarize the articles. Dividing the labor makes this a much easier task.

❑ The Iowa Content Networks (with its links to other reviews of research);
❑ *Reading Research Quarterly* (the primary research publication of the International Reading Association); and
❑ *Review of Educational Research* (a journal published by the American Educational Research Association that is devoted entirely to reviews of research on specific topics).

Mid-Continent stopped here to summarize general findings and trends. At this point it appeared that several instructional strategies had strong research support for teaching advanced comprehension skills to adolescents (e.g., inductive strategies, activating prior schema, reciprocal teaching, independent reading with student choice of books, vocabulary teaching strategies, think alouds, and collaborative discourse.) It appeared that, given the multiplicity of student learning preferences in any classroom and the prior learning histories of struggling adolescent readers, a successful intervention needed to incorporate a variety of powerful instructional strategies.

> A general note in terms of process: Try to get a general feel for a body of work, rather than going immediately for the "one right answer." Assume such a search is going to take a couple of days, and consider it time well spent if an entire staff will then invest a year of their time and energy studying, learning, implementing, and evaluating the product of the search. When reading reviews, also mark promising references that you may want to read in full.

Tool 2(content).4. Examples of Processes for Selecting Content (p 3 of 5)

Sources of Additional Information Mid-Continent Considered Before Decision- Making

Educational Laboratories and Centers. The federal government funds educational laboratories and centers around the country, many attached to universities. It is the mission of these labs and centers to conduct research in education. The web site www.ed.gov/prog_info/Labs/ linked to all the federally funded educational laboratories. The site provided links to several labs currently conducting research in reading and provides some very useful reading.

Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools had a very useful review of research on both reading and math for high school freshmen struggling with those subjects. The full text of the article provided a very useful summary of the needs of such students as well as the remedies available.

> Note: When reviewing articles that have not gone through a review process, be aware that there may be mistakes or omissions. When authors are cited in text but missing in references, go to ERIC or EBSCO to find the reference.

Publishers' Websites. Some publishers hire researchers to evaluate the impact of their programs on students. Although some dismiss any research conducted by a publisher or commissioned by a publisher, judge such research on a case-by-case basis (e.g., examine the quality of an actual piece of research before drawing conclusions about the strength of its findings).

An example of such research is on the web site at www.scholastic.com on its secondary reading program READ 180. After reading the information on their web site, the publisher was asked for the technical report of the initial study conducted on this program and was willing to send the report.

ERIC and EBSCO. ERIC and EBSCO are data bases that list references (and sometimes, full text) for articles published in educational journals, conference presentations, reports published by foundations, labs and centers, etc. Both data bases provide abstracts of reports and articles listed. When full text is not available on EBSCO, the reference can be found in ERIC, and the document needed can be ordered or located in a college library.

Summary of Sources. The sizes of these data bases are simultaneously their strength and weakness: if one is imprecise when requesting information, a search can yield thousands of articles, many of which are neither research nor on your topic. Nevertheless, these are invaluable resources for identifying research in a given topic.

Fewer programs exist at the secondary level than at the elementary level. There are, however, many studies of effective instructional strategies in this area. That left Mid-Continent School District with the choice of choosing from a few already developed secondary reading programs or developing one by learning a combination of powerful instructional strategies.

The benefits of choosing an already developed program were obvious. Someone else has already gone through the trial and error of combining various strategies and programs and testing the entire program to determine its effectiveness. A second benefit is the relative ease of getting training in one place for a developed program. However, as mentioned earlier, there are not as many choices at the secondary level.

Identify Options

The next step for Mid-Continent School District was to summarize the findings of their search and to collect the relevant articles/studies before presenting options to a decision making body. The presentation to the group might begin like this: "We have identified three programs and six strategies (plus some promising practices) that are strongly supported by research. Secondary students have repeatedly improved their reading comprehension skills when taught with these programs and strategies. We have divided you into six teams – three teams will each get the best report of a program, and each of the other three teams will get the best study for each of two strategies. Before our next meeting, analyze your reports/articles and come prepared to summarize the findings and make recommendations for the faculty (or committee or board)."

Get Information on Costs (For Training And Materials) and Availability of Trainers

Once the decision-making body had ranked its choice, the top three choices were selected, and information was collected on costs for materials and training. This information assisted the decision-making group in making a final decision.

Insert your choice into the "Select Content" section of the Iowa Professional Development Model and begin!

Example 2: Winfield-Mt. Union and AEA 16

This example describes a process used by Winfield-Mt. Union Community School District and Area Education Agency 16. By following the Iowa Professional Development Model, this process enabled the district to be deliberate in its selection of staff development content for the school year.

After recognizing they needed key district components in place, Winfield-Mt. Union enlisted the assistance of consultants from AEA 16 to guide them in the professional development cycle. The AEA Assessment Consultant led District leaders through an educational process that helped them align their Annual Progress Reports and Comprehensive School Improvement Plan with the No Child Left Behind requirements. The District also reevaluated and tightened its Standards and benchmarks to reflect further alignment.

In the meantime, the District established a Professional Development Leadership Team, which consists of lower elementary, upper elementary, secondary core, secondary elective, special education teachers, an administrator, and the Districts' school improvement coordinators. The District team is partnered with an AEA 16 team to pilot the Iowa Professional Development Model and to attend training institutes. Additionally, AEA 16 has a Partnering for Improvement initiative for all AEA 16 districts, guiding teams from those districts through each component of the Iowa Professional Development Model. The Winfield-Mt. Union Leadership Team participated in this initiative, which helped them in developing professional development efforts when they returned to their district.

The first step in the District Leadership Team's process was to study Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Iowa Tests of Educational Development, District Developed Assessments, and ICAM data. The AEA Assessment Consultant facilitated this process.

As a result of this analysis, District data indicated many areas in which professional development could be focused. However, the team wanted to select an area in which all teachers, regardless of grade level or content area, could relate to and apply to their respective classrooms. Because vocabulary was identified as needing improvement throughout K-12, the leadership team selected it as an appropriate content area for their staff development focus.

The district committed to setting aside ten full professional development days for the school year. Keeping the guidelines for the "simultaneity" operating principle of in mind, the leadership team planned that the major portion of the staff development time would be devoted to the training and collaboration needed to implement with fidelity the vocabulary strategies chosen.

With the time set aside for training, the leadership team's next step was to collaborate with AEA 16 to determine how external content area support could be provided to the district. It was decided that two reading consultants from the AEA would provide the content for the district's yearlong staff development sessions.

At the request of the district leadership team, the AEA was asked to obtain six of the most effective vocabulary strategies that had a scientific research base and that had already been reviewed. An overview of these strategies would be shared with the district leadership team before deciding which of the strategy overviews to share with the entire staff. Because of the short turn-around time between content selection and the onset of training and implementation, the decision was made to only look at strategies that had already been studied. Research was selected by the AEA consultants who resourced the Iowa Professional Development Reading Content Network's findings, as well as independently seeking scientifically based studies. Only studies that received a 4 or 5 rating were considered.

After the AEA reading consultants selected studies to share with the leadership team, the team decided it needed to see additional studies before making their decision. With a final broad sampling of strategies with a scientific research base to choose from, the leadership felt it was ready for the strategy overviews to be shared with the whole staff that would be involved in the staff development trainings.

Tool 2(content).4. Examples of Processes for Selecting Content (p 5 of 5)

At the staff development session attended by all K-12 teachers and administrators, the AEA consultants gave a one-hour overview of each of the strategies that included how each could be applied in multiple subject areas and across multiple grades. Following the presentations, the staff met in focus groups to collaborate and share reactions to the strategies presented. All teachers had an opportunity to voice their opinions in the

focus group before key points were shared when the large group met to make a decision. This participative decision-making resulted in the strategy that was selected for this year's professional development focus.

The training sessions have begun and include opportunities for theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback in each day's workshop experience. Tools for collecting implementation data are being used, and a method for monitoring implementation is taking place. Plans to study the data at the end of the 10-week experiment frame are present to determine the design for the remaining staff development sessions. A key component to the effectiveness of Winfield-Mt. Union's implementation of this strategy is the commitment of the district to provide opportunities for collaboration. Collaborative teams of four include teachers from cross grade and subject levels. For example, a high school chemistry teacher, a middle school language arts teacher, and a kindergarten teacher might be represented on one team.

The district is looking ahead to how the successful implementation of this strategy can be sustained while considering the next area on which to focus its attention. It knows, however, that it will begin the process again by looking at its data and selecting content with a strong scientific research base that best matches its need—for both students and teachers.